

FINE POINT

Persuasion vs Independent Thinking

Thinking Environment

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PERSUASION VS INDEPENDENT THINKING

I have been reading a collection of blog posts by Scott Adams. Adams created *Dilbert*, the most famous workplace cartoon. His takes are wry, verging on cynical, uncannily accurate. They are madly popular in organisations all over the world. If you don't know *Dilbert*, here is a link: <http://dilbert.com>.

Anyway, it turns out that Scott Adams is also an expert in persuasion psychology. My science mentor, Bill godwin, told me I would do well to learn about persuasion psychology if I am serious about a society of independent clear thinkers. Not in order to persuade people about such a society, but in order to factor in the key persuader idea which is that hardly anybody actually thinks. We all just react and decide from emotion.

So he generously sent me a PDF he created of Adams' blog posts (Aug May 2016) because Adams has been analysing the Donald Trump phenomenon from a 'master persuader' perspective. You probably need to be freeeeezing in Orkney to get through all of this (365 pages), so I won't attach it here. But

even dipping for 10 minutes into his posts in that time period will be worth it. It is a way to learn about the applied psychology of persuasion. And it partly explains the Trump phenomenon, which is a relief.

It is especially salient for people who keep scratching their heads and asking things like, 'What is the teflon in Trump's scandalous, mendacious, racist, crude, vicious, unprincipled, barely syntactical, narcissistic, 8-year-old utterances? Why do people, even those who say they eschew these things about him, still cheer wildly at his rallies? Why do his behaviour and vapid/outrageous policies not dissuade them from voting for him?'

Because they have been persuaded. Because they have been emotionally captured. Trump, says Adams, is using, on purpose, the techniques of persuasion psychology, and they are working. And it is exactly those behaviours and those empty policies that have hooked people. Adams says people are not thinking. They are feeling.

And they are overlaying these feelings with rationalisation. When asked why they support him, they say, 'He's an outsider and can bypass insider politics; he can fix the economy because he is a successful (i.e., rich) business man; he understands us because he understands that we have been shafted by government and big business....'

This persuasion concept helps explain the Brexit campaign, too. And it is present in the Tory Party leadership election. It is likely present at your dinner table as well (If you still have dinner around a table!).

It is even likely that the last time you persuaded someone of something, you did it by employing at least a few of those techniques. It is less likely that you convinced them through fact and reason.

The reason I am writing about this in *Fine Point* is that the thesis of this field has raised afresh for me three questions that hover around the premise of the Thinking Environment:

1
Can people think for themselves?

2
Is that what we are doing when we are participating in a Thinking Environment?

3
Is independent thinking *ipso facto* good thinking?

Scott Adams would say:

1
No.

2
No.

3
No.

Here's why:

Human beings are (according to him and the field of persuasion psychology) 90% irrational. Never mind our wondrous cortex and its ability to interact cogently with the limbic system. In living our lives, only 10% of the time do we use facts or reason to make decisions. We use emotion. Free will is an illusion; persuasion is everything. The right words rewire the mind; and then persuasion operates on the reflex part of the brain. Successful persuaders (anyone trying to influence us) appeal to the irrational mind, not to reason or analysis. It does not matter what they say or what their argument is; it is how they make us feel and where they keep us focused that work.

So if someone wants you to make a particular decision or accept a particular view, here are 18 techniques they can use. Apparently it takes only about 5 of these to get you firmly into their camp. The 18 all have to do with generating emotion, not generating reason or sense. According to this field of thought, we have no choice about their effect on us.

Master Persuasion Techniques

1

Thinking past the 'sale' (taking us visually to their desired outcome before we have begun to decide)

2

'Kill shots' (labelling the enemy target with unusual terms – not usually used in that context – even if the labels are lies)

3

Repetition (of what they want us to remember, especially 'kill shots')

4

Association (describing us with positive words and stories; or describing the enemy with negative words and stories)

5

Identity as people (speaking to who we think we are as a person, to our inner self image)

6

Cognitive dissonance (saying what we are thinking but don't dare admit to ourselves because it is 'not like us')

7

Visuals (avoiding concepts)

8

Stories (avoiding facts or ideas)

9

Powerful first statement (making it what they want us to remember)

10

Changing the frame of reference (changing the argument away from their vulnerabilities when attacked)

11

Brevity (keeping sentences to very few words)

12

Equivocation in promises or analyses (so that they do not seem wrong)

13

Powerful/authoritative presence

14

Contrast (offering a difference from our current situation)

15

Unpredictability (keeping us slightly wary but gripped)

16

Empathy (making us feel that they understand us)

17

Confirmation bias (saying what we want to believe; fitting any evidence to support any premise)

18

Exaggerated/outrageous first proposal or data (so they can negotiate with us and seem flexible)

These techniques are amoral, so we can see them working in persuaders at all points on the political and values spectrum. 'Good' people use them; and 'bad' people use them.

Importantly, persuaders are doing this whether they know it or not. But persuaders who have learned how to do this are particularly effective because they can plot their persuasion map and their next moves. Natural persuaders are more hit and miss. But they are still effective.

Adams also says that even when people know the techniques of persuasion, they are vulnerable to them.

So what does the recognition of the effectiveness and omnipresence of these persuasion techniques mean for the thinking human being? Does it prove that human beings are 90% irrational? That we don't make decisions or lead our lives by thinking?

I don't think so. Even the possibility that human beings behave irrationally 90% of the time, does not mean we are 90% irrational. Behaviour and nature are very different things.

People's experience in Thinking Environments recognises this difference. Our experience indicates that human beings can become better and better at using reason and information and at integrating emotion successfully and autonomously into their decision-making. Being in a Thinking Environment can change the game.

Two things happen in a Thinking Environment:

1

Thinking Environment conditions keep us thinking, and keep us conscious of and adept at handling our emotions. We are allowed to stay with the experience rather than being swept away by interruption or others' feelings. We generate our own ideas. We do not lose ourselves in theirs.

2

Over time, with practice, we establish new defaults to our own thinking, so that outside a Thinking Environment we also choose to generate our own thoughts.

As we practice and become expert at thinking for ourselves in Thinking Environments, we then begin to transfer this expertise into non-thinking environments. We begin to develop an everywhere-default to independent thinking.

I think that this experience suggests that in a Thinking Environment we can grow more and more immune to the pull of unconscious persuasion. We are no longer prey. We experience that we do have choice.

Perhaps, actually, it could be said that human beings are as prone to persuasion, as vulnerable to emotional triggers as they are exactly because they have not had Thinking Environments in their lives. From birth to death human lives are saturated with persuasion and requirement for compliance in all forms. There exists hardly anywhere the injunction to think for ourselves.

So perhaps it is not true that human are 90% irrational. Perhaps we are just 90% deprived of Thinking Environments.

Returning to those earlier questions:

Do you think that human beings can think for themselves?

When we are in a Thinking Environment is that what we are doing (or are we still under the influence of involuntary persuasion)?

Is independent thinking *ipso facto* good thinking?

I would like to think about those questions cleanly.

And I want to keep in mind this observation: the quality of everything we do is only as good as the quality of the independent thinking we do first.

If that observation is accurate, and from experience it by now seems likely, we owe it to our world to contemplate its implications.

We have seen around the world its positive implications for organisations, for meetings of all kinds, for the professions of business and personal coaching, therapy, counselling and teaching, and for decision making and relationships in individual lives.

Now looking at the dynamics of persuasion, which have been invisibly in front of us all along, I predict that the observation that 'the quality of everything we do depends on the quality of the independent thinking we do first' prevails here as well.

Reclaiming our nature as embracers of reason and information, and as potentially well-integrated emotional beings, people can build Thinking Environments not only as a culture of living, but also as a force against involuntary persuasion.

I think that our experience says 'yes' to the three questions above:

Yes, we can think for ourselves.

Yes, we are thinking for ourselves when we are in a genuine Thinking Environment.

Yes, truly independent thinking is good thinking.

We'll see. But certainly the results in at the moment would suggest so.

They would also suggest that perhaps we do not have to be helpless victims of forced persuasion after all.

Nor be herded by the persuaders.